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FEBRUARY 1991

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ERIC GOODMAN

# An Island Cruz

*A family ships out for Santa*

*Cruz Island's Scorpion Ranch.*

EARLY ONE SATURDAY, BEARING BOTTLED water, sleeping bags and an enormous red cooler, we four boarded the *We Seven* in Ventura Harbor. What a morning. Bright sun, the gentlest of breezes and seas so flat that the Santa Barbara Channel spread out before us, a big blue puddle. At the puddle's edge, 21 miles away but perfectly visible—"It's not always this clear," Kirk, the Island Packers guide, cautioned us—lay our destination: Santa Cruz, largest of the five islands that compose Channel Islands National Park.

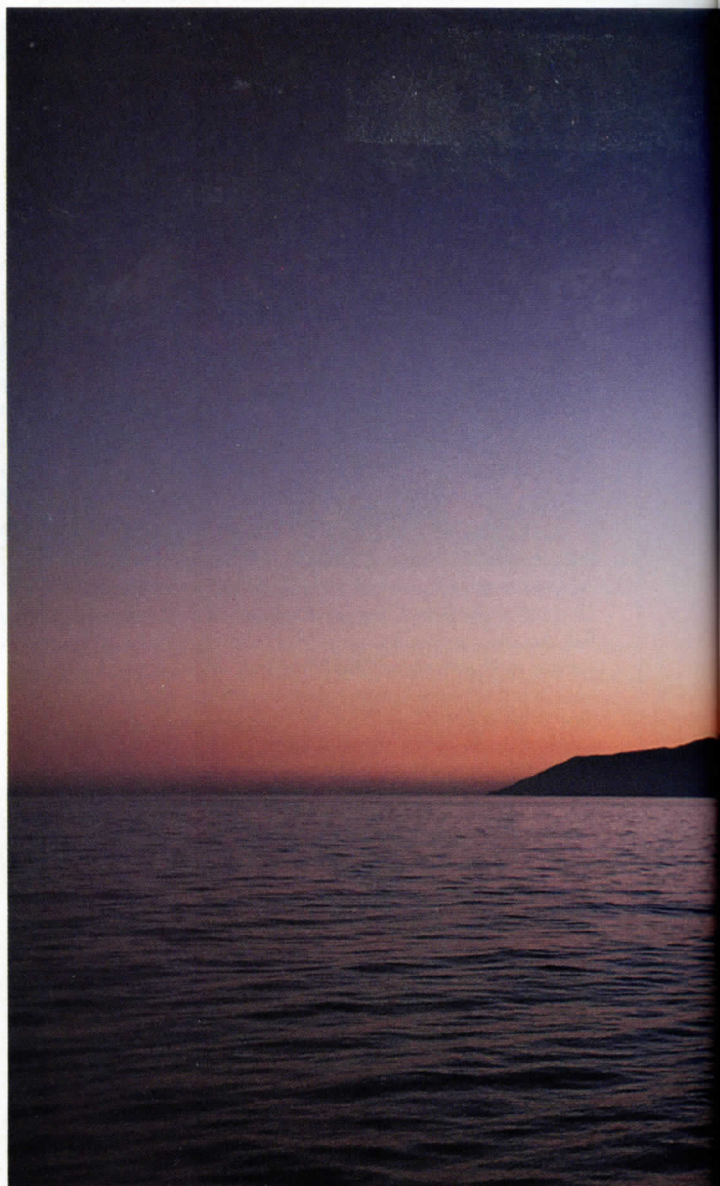


**Ethan displays his prize find.**

Because we four included our eager children, Ethan, seven, and Seneca, nearly four, Susan and I seated ourselves in the bow, backs against the wheelhouse, eyes to the sea. As we motored out from the harbor, I decided to teach the junior lookouts a thing or two about geography. I pointed over the bow and told them we were heading west. Kirk gently corrected me. The coastline corkscrews at Ventura, he said; the boat was proceeding south. I glanced down at the kids—they were grinning.

The low island on the eastern side of the horizon was Anacapa, renowned for its sea lion population. The steeper, barren-looking rock dead ahead was Santa Cruz. We were headed for the eastern end, which is owned by the Gherini family, descendants of Justinian Caire, who acquired Santa Cruz in 1880. For about \$100 each, we would be allowed to explore the Gherini end of the island for two days and sleep at the Scorpion Ranch, a turn-of-the-century homestead.

In the meantime, we were enjoying the ride out. "The white foam flew," quoth the Ancient Mariner, "the furrow followed free." And so it was with us as the *We Seven* chugged toward Santa Cruz. We passed a herd of sea lions clinging to the first buoy outside the harbor. The animals roared and waved their flippers, and Ethan, who's learning to use a camera, knew what to do.



**Santa Cruz Island rises, dark and mysterious, out of the**



RALPH A. CLEVELAND





**Santa Barbara Channel, above; a Risso's dolphin practices its stroke in the deep, blue water, below.**

Seven miles out, we began to see double-dorsal-finned blue sharks, four feet long, lolling on the surface, waiting for breakfast to swim by. "Shark! Shark!" someone would cry, and the kids and I would rush to the railing to watch the blues swirl and dive. A little farther out, but still in the deep part of the channel, an enormous car carrier—long as a city block and twenty stories high—swept before us. *NISSAN*, it proclaimed, a reminder, as were the omnipresent oil rigs, of the decade we hoped to leave behind.

A few minutes later, we chanced upon a large pod of Risso's dolphins, which are longer and considerably less svelte than the common blacks. The Risso's—gray, white and speckled—rolled and lazily swam twenty yards off the prow while kids and adults shrieked and pointed; shutters clicked, film advanced and shutters clicked again. All the while, Santa Cruz grew off the bow. I was becoming as excited as my kids.

*How wonderful, I remember thinking, to be island-bound.*

THE WE SEVEN DROPPED ANCHOR NEAR A HALF-dozen sailboats clumped 100 yards off the rocky Scorpion Ranch beach. Using the launch we'd towed from Ventura, the crew transported guests and gear to the beach, where we were welcomed by Duane Owens, caretaker of Scorpion Ranch. Duane, who later admitted to having been an Ojai high school principal for 26 years, looked like a prospector as Norman Rockwell might have sketched him: kindly, bald and bearded.

We heaved our gear into the luggage cart on the back of Duane's four-wheel-drive vehicle, and he plopped my children down inside, one in front, one behind, and set off for the ranch compound a hundred yards away. Susan and I followed on foot along a path that runs through the ranch's narrow valley. Ashore, our first impression was much as it had been from the boat: a moonscape. The hills were bare, gray and rocky. A dirt road was carved high into one of the hillsides, while at its base the ground was dark and so hard-baked nothing grew in it. We passed rusted ranch equipment, an abandoned boat. And though we were in a hurry to





**In a shack near the ranch house, caretaker Duane Owens exhibits local curios, including rams' skulls.**

reach the ranch and claim our rooms, we couldn't help but notice that the ground was littered with bones.

THE ACCOMMODATIONS WERE LOVELY—NOT EX-actly luxurious, but then Scorpion Ranch was about charm, not luxury. Because there were only nine overnight guests, Susan, the kids and I had a suite in a 75-year-old ranch house. The beds weren't much, but the decor was great: an enormous circular-saw blade under the wood stove; old desks and paintings; and on the front porch, a sheep skull with magnificent curved horns.

While waiting for the guided nature walk to begin, we lunched in the courtyard. In the six and a half years he and his son, Jaret, have run Scorpion and the nearby ranch at Smugglers Cove (where bow-and-arrow hunters after ram's-

**The compound at Scorpion Ranch is a green oasis.**



head trophies are entertained), Duane has restored and painted the buildings, put in a lawn and created a calm oasis of palms, geraniums and fruit trees inside the fence that secures the immediate ranch compound. But Duane's tenure on the island has corresponded with the drought, and outside the compound the place looks like a wasteland. The fence, we soon understood, wasn't built to keep pets or tourist children in. It was needed to *keep out* the few remaining wild pigs, wild horses and the herd, once numbering in the thousands, of feral Santa Cruz sheep—descendants of domestic Merinos brought over 140 or more years ago by the Spanish.

Kirk led the nature walk, and a harsher, more barren landscape I have not seen. Once we cleared the eucalyptus grove that borders the ranch and started up the slope toward Cavern Point, nothing grew, not even the proverbial blade of grass. We sighted a few straggly sheep on the next hillside grazing on Lord knows what, but here there was just a bare path, and below us an eroded gully. The dark soil of the path was dotted with thousands of equally dark pellets.

"Daddy," Ethan asked. "What are those?"

"Son, that's sheep shit."

Kirk halted the procession when the path turned, halfway up the hill. "I like to call this ground zero," he said, spreading his arms. "It's the result of the drought and overgrazing." Then he pointed west. "Three years ago, Dr. Stanton, who owned that 90 percent of the island, died and left it to the Nature Conservancy. They restore land to its natural state. To do that, they put up a fence to keep out the sheep from this side of the island, then hired professional hunters, who shot all the sheep on that side of the island." Silence from the assembled tourists. I looked at Kirk and then at the bare hills.



No doubt about it, they'd been picked clean. Still, there was something beautiful about the very barrenness of the land—the way the brown and gray of the hills played against the rich blue of the sea.

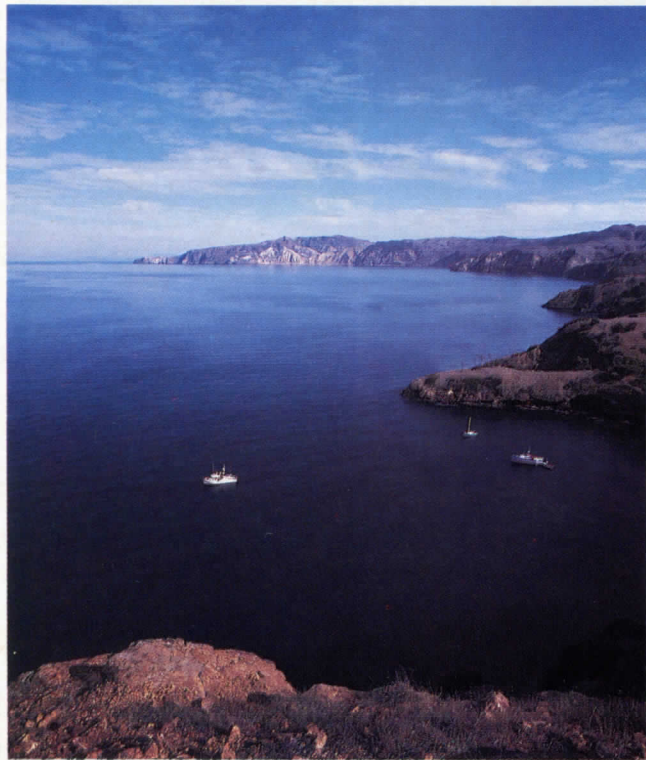
We continued up toward Cavern Point. Two hillsides away, beyond the dividing fence, the land was greener. Bushes were growing, and small trees; on our side, it was just volcanic soil and more sheep droppings. Kirk told us that when he started leading tours, the bluff we were crossing was covered with three-inch-high grass on which a hundred sheep would be grazing. I tried to imagine that, tried to imagine that the skeletons we passed were live sheep.

My kids, meanwhile, were wild about the sheep bones and ran around gathering them, exclaiming over each new discovery. When Ethan, who'd been studying skeletons at school, spied an entire spinal column with its pelvic attachments still intact just outside the safety rail at Cavern Point, he pleaded with me to get it for him. Which I did. Back on the proper side of the rail, I stood with Susan and looked out over the blue water at Anacapa's green cliffs and the California coast. It was a view for the ages. Directly behind us stood our kids, their arms piled high with sheep bones.

**A**FTER OUR WALK, WE PLAYED ON THE BEACH, RETURNING to the compound as night was falling. Duane had readied hot coals in the ranch's enormous grills, and a plague of 25 yachtpeople—from the sailboats anchored off the beach—had descended on the compound for a barbecue. The men wore white pants and Topsiders; several of the women balanced on designer boots. They told knock-knock jokes, ate filet mignon, talked too loud, drank mixed drinks and talked even louder.

Dusk also brought out several Channel Island foxes. Small as cats, gray on top and with red underbellies, they are a

**The Santa Cruz coastline shows off its curves.**



RALPH A. CLEVELAND



WILLIAM DUNN

**The grass is always greener on the Nature Conservancy's side of the island.**

subspecies of the mainland gray fox. Half-tame, the foxes feasted on the yachtpeople's leavings, climbing into the trash and growling occasionally to establish dominance. Ethan and Seneca cooed and beckoned, but the foxes never came over to be petted.

We overnights—the arrival of the yachtpeople had done wonders for our solidarity—shared in the food and drinks, but weren't really happy until the night blackened, the moon brightened and the boat people returned whence they came. Soon the stars came out, producing a night of unquenchable beauty, and the foxes retired to their dens, our children to their beds. Susan and I sat with the other adults around a fire Duane had built for us. We drank wine, sipped hot chocolate and talked of this and that. Woodsmoke and ash ascended to the stars, while outside the compound the sheep bedded down for another dry night.

**E**THAN AND I WOKE EARLY TO PHOTOGRAPH RED dawn breaking over the hills. We found a number of sheep gathered outside the gate for the water and feed that Duane always gives them. They were spectral-looking, with ragged fleece and eyes that flashed pink, the males' magnificent horns curving tightly around their faces. I learned later that much of Duane's sheep feed was provided by the American Minor Breed Conservancy, a group that works to save rare farm animals. In exchange for the feed, Jaret, the official lessee of both Gherini ranches, allows the Minor Breed Conservancy to rescue animals from his side—as long as they don't take many rams.

Ethan and I snapped pictures of the dawn and the sheep, who came close, but not too close. They stood only as high as my son's waist. He raised the camera to his face, snapped, snapped again, then turned to me in the changing light.

"Are they going to be all right?"

Why lie? "I hope so."

We snapped a few more pictures. The sky brightened suddenly to full day. We stepped back inside the fence, closed the gate against the sheep and returned to Scorpion Ranch to eat our breakfast.

*Island Packers (805/642-1393) offers day and overnight trips to Santa Cruz Island year-round. Departures vary depending on the season. Island Packers also handles reservations for Scorpion Ranch.*